

Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE): Second Biennial Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2003, California concluded the third year of administering its High School Exit Examination. The requirement that students pass a graduation exam in English-language arts (ELA) and mathematics beginning with the Class of 2004 was established by Senate Bill (SB)-2X passed in 1999 and written into the California Education Code as Chapter 8, Section 60850. This section of the code was further modified through the passage of Assembly Bill (AB) 1609 in 2002. The revised legislation that gave the State Board of Education (the Board) authority to postpone the CAHSEE requirement was based in part on a mandated study of the extent to which both test development and standards-based instruction met the criteria for this type of examination. The study report was issued on May 1, 2003 (Wise et al., May 2003). At its July 2003 meeting, the Board voted to defer the CAHSEE requirement to the graduating class of 2006.

The legislation that authorized the graduation exam also specified an independent evaluation of the CAHSEE. The California Department of Education (CDE) awarded a contract for this evaluation to the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO). HumRRO's efforts focus on analyses of data from tryouts of test questions and from the annual administrations of the CAHSEE, and on reporting trends in pupil performance and retention, graduation, dropout, and college attendance rates. The legislation also specified that evaluation reporting will include recommendations for improving the quality, fairness, validity, and reliability of the examination. This document meets the legislative requirement for biennial reports of evaluation activities and findings to be submitted February 1 in even-numbered years. Our report examines results subsequent to those reported in the legislatively mandated January 2002 report covering the 2001 CAHSEE administration (Wise, Sipes, Harris, George, Ford, & Sun, 2002). Additional reports on evaluation findings were provided in annual reports to CDE (Wise et al., June 2002; Wise et al. September 2003) and in the report to the Board (Wise et al. May 2003) submitted in fulfillment of study requirements under AB 1609.

Test Development, Administration, and Scoring

When the Legislature passed AB 1609 in 2002, it mandated specific changes to the CAHSEE, including a special study of the extent to which the development of the CAHSEE and standards-based instruction met the requirements for a high school graduation test. Evaluation activities were expanded to meet the requirements for this study. A detailed description of the study, along with findings and recommendations, were included in a report to the Board issued May 1 and are not repeated in the present report (Wise et al., May 2003, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/>).

Evaluation activities summarized in the current biennial report include:

Review of Test Developer Plans and Reports. HumRRO continued to monitor test development activities and reports. These included changes to test administration procedures, equating alternate forms, changes to reporting procedures, and review of performance standards for ELA and mathematics.

Analysis of Operational CAHSEE Data. HumRRO analyzed results from the six operational administrations of CAHSEE from July 2002 through May 2003. These included continued administration to 11th graders in the Class of 2004 who had not yet passed one or both parts of the CAHSEE and a census administration to 10th graders in the Class of 2005. Results from the analyses of student test results are described in Chapter 2 of this report. Additional analyses of student responses to survey questions are described in Chapter 3.

Longitudinal Surveys of District and School Sample Personnel. The annual survey of a longitudinal representative sample of 24 districts and approximately 90 of their high schools continued for the fourth consecutive year; one district's refusal required replacement of that district, including three schools. The surveys, which were administered to principals and English-language arts and mathematics teachers, provided a continuing look at schools' perspectives of the impact of the CAHSEE on their programs. In addition, testing coordinators were surveyed for the second year to identify problems with the administration of the CAHSEE. Results from these analyses are described in Chapter 4 of this report.

Surveys and Interviews on Instruction. In winter of 2003, HumRRO conducted a special study of instruction in the content standards covered by the CAHSEE. The instruction survey, conducted to meet AB 1609 requirements, was completed by principals and teachers in 298 California high schools, and also by principals and teachers at 173 middle-grade feeder schools. The teacher surveys covered 3,270 high school courses and 2,006 middle-grade feeder school courses. Information from the survey was supplemented by visits to a smaller sample of schools. Principals and teachers at each site were interviewed to elicit information to confirm and expand on the information obtained through the surveys. A total of 62 schools were visited, including 45 high schools and 17 middle-grade feeder schools, and a total of 499 interviews were conducted at these schools. Results from these surveys and interviews are presented in Chapter 5 of this report.

Effectiveness of Instruction. Information from the CAHSEE administrations was also used in assessing standards-based instruction. Passing rates were computed for each of the state's 1,843 high schools and used in assessing the effectiveness of standards-based instruction in each high school together with its associated middle and elementary schools. This information is used extensively in Chapter 6, which discusses the effectiveness of current standards-based instruction.

Findings and Recommendations

The main findings and recommendations stemming from recent evaluation activities are presented in Chapter 7. In brief, the general findings are as follows:

General Finding 1: The development of the CAHSEE meets all of the test standards for use as a graduation requirement.

General Finding 2: The CAHSEE requirement has been a major factor leading to dramatically increased coverage of the California Academic Content Standards at both the high school and middle school levels and to development or improvement of courses providing help for students who have difficulty mastering these standards.

General Finding 3: Available evidence indicates that many courses of initial instruction and remedial courses have only limited effectiveness in helping students master the required standards.

General Finding 4: Lack of prerequisite skills may prevent many students from receiving the benefits of courses that provide instruction in relevant content standards. Inadequate student motivation and lack of strong parental support may play a contributing role in limiting the effectiveness of these courses.

General Finding 5: While precise comparisons are not possible, by the end of 10th grade passing rates for students in the Class of 2005 were slightly lower than passing rates for students in the Class of 2004.

General Finding 6: Available evidence indicates that the CAHSEE has not led to any increase in dropout rates. In fact enrollment declines from 10th to 11th grade for the Class of 2004 were significantly lower than declines for prior high school classes.

General Finding 7: More students in the Class of 2005 believed that the CAHSEE was important to them compared to Class of 2004 students when they were in the 10th grade. Slightly more said they did as well as they could on the exam. Expectations for graduation and post-high school plans were largely unchanged for the Class of 2005 in comparison to the Class of 2004.

General Finding 8: Schools are continuing efforts to ensure that the California Academic Content Standards are covered in instruction and to provide support for students who need additional help in mastering these standards. Many programs that were in the planning stages or only partially implemented a year ago have now been fully implemented.

General Finding 9: Teacher and principal expectations for the impact of CAHSEE on students are largely unchanged from prior years.

General Finding 10: Professional development in the teaching of the content standards has not yet been extensive.

General Finding 11: There were no significant problems with local understanding of test administration procedures, but some issues remain with the provision of student data and the assignment of testing accommodations.

Subsequent to the 2003 administrations, the Board deferred implementation of the CAHSEE requirement to the Class of 2006. Based on information available to date (as summarized in our general findings), we offer four recommendations for future administration of the CAHSEE.

Recommendation 1: Restarting the exam with the Class of 2006 provides some opportunities for improvement; however, careful consideration should be given to any changes that are implemented.

The AB 1609 study report (Wise et al., May 2003) included several recommendations for changes that could ensure better alignment of what is tested with what is taught, making it easier for all students to demonstrate adequate mastery of the intended content. At its July 2003 meeting, the Board approved plans to shorten the ELA testing to a single day and to reduce cognitive demands for mathematics questions while still assessing the same standards. Changes to the score scale and possibly even the reexamination of test content specifications are also being considered.

Given the opportunity to restart the CAHSEE for the Class of 2006 next year, consideration of such changes is entirely appropriate. An exact equating of scores from new administrations to scores from prior administrations is not necessary, since the prior administrations no longer “count.” (All students tested to date are no longer required to pass the CAHSEE.) Nonetheless, the time to implement changes is very short. For example, forms for the 2004 administrations must be printed well ahead of time, so there is no time to develop and field test new questions. In addition, current procedures have worked very well. A careful review will be needed to ensure that proposed alternatives will work equally well.

We are particularly concerned that there be adequate technical review of plans to reduce the testing time for ELA to a single day. Members of the original HSEE Standards Panel that recommended the content to be covered by the test felt strongly about the need for students to demonstrate their ability to write coherently. To what extent will eliminating one of the two essay questions increase errors in classifying students as passing or not passing? Will the relative weight assigned to writing versus reading and to the writing standards covered by the essays, in particular, be changed? There is, unfortunately, not time for the Board to seek the advice of another panel of content experts on these matters, but a careful technical review is both feasible and important.

Recommendation 2: The California Department of Education and the State Board of Education should continue to monitor and encourage efforts by districts and schools to implement effective standards-based instruction.

Results from the AB 1609 study (Wise et al., May 2003) indicated that standards-based instruction was widely available in both middle and high schools. High school instruction includes significant new efforts to provide second-chance opportunities for students who did not fully master required skills during initial instruction. The study also found, however, that current instruction was not effective in that many students taking the standards-based courses offered still could not pass the CAHSEE. There were indications that instruction was likely to improve for students in high school classes beyond 2004 and 2005. Ensuring that effective

instruction is available to all students remains critical to the successful implementation of the CAHSEE requirements. CDE must monitor further improvements to standards-based instruction, and both CDE and the Board should encourage further efforts in this regard. Providing information on exemplary programs to other districts is one example of how such efforts might be encouraged.

Recommendation 3: Professional development for teachers is a significant opportunity for improvement.

Results from the AB 1609 study indicated that many students were taking initial and remedial courses covering the California Academic Content Standards included on the CAHSEE, but were not benefiting fully from these courses. One reason was that the students did not have important prerequisite knowledge or skills. Additional professional development for teachers could help them be more effective in the courses they are already teaching and also could help them identify students needing additional help with prerequisite skills. One particular target of opportunity identified in the AB 1609 study was that a significant number of teachers involved in remedial mathematics had considerable experience with special education students, but less training in mathematics itself.

Recommendation 4: Further consideration of the CAHSEE requirements for special education students is needed, in light of the low passing rates for this group.

In our evaluation activities, we have introduced separate consideration of special education students who are able to participate in regular classes and those who cannot. Treating all special education students as a single group may mask solutions that could help those able to master critical content standards, while setting more realistic expectations for students who cannot reasonably be expected to master these standards.

The very low passing rate, particularly in mathematics, for special education students who are African American or Hispanic deserves further investigation. Are these students somehow more severely handicapped? Are they concentrated in less effective schools? How can we best understand and remediate these discrepancies?

Overall, the CAHSEE requirement continues to have a significant impact on instruction and student achievement. Much work remains to be done in helping all students meet the standards for high school graduation that have been established. CDE and the Board face continuing challenges in implementing the CAHSEE requirement.

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